

Some Common Problems and The Ways to Improve Writing a Paragraph of English Majored Freshmen at Tay Do University in Viet Nam

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ABSTRACT: *Writing skill is an important aspect of academic performance as well as subsequent work-related one. In fact, most of the first-year majored students at Tay Do University (TDU) still got many difficulties in writing. This study was conducted to identify common writing problems and find out some ways to improve writing skill. The participants consisted of 74 freshmen at TDU. The main data were obtained from the questionnaire and 15 paragraphs written in English by group of two or three students. The results from the data analysis showed that the common problems that the students committed in their English writing were the way of idea expression, limited vocabulary and grammatical errors. This result also mentioned some ways to improve writing skill as writing an outline, reading books relating to the topic and practicing writing. Thus, the study could contribute to learning and teaching English writing at TDU. Moreover, the result could provide students with valuable information so that they could minimize problems in writing.*

KEY WORDS: writing, English majored students, university

INTRODUCTION

When the world is more developed, the needs of opening to cooperate with foreign countries are also increasing, English is considered an instrument to connect people all over the world. Therefore, the importance of English cannot be denied and ignored since English is the most common language spoken everywhere. With the help of developing technology, English has been playing a major role in many sectors including medicine, engineering, and education. Particularly, in Vietnam - a developing country, learning English is one of the best decisions one can make in order to communicate with others.

To acquire the communicative competence, learners have to learn four skills (reading, speaking, listening and writing), among which writing skill is very important because it is a productive skill. Writing helps people to glide through ideas, feelings and opinion without getting perplexed. Nowadays, according to Alderson and Bachman (2002:1), the ability to write effectively is becoming increasingly important in our global community. In fact, every career path requires its workers to write notes, memos, emails, and reports, all of which require good writing skills to

effectively communicate a certain set of ideas. However, most people realize the importance of learning writing English, not all can do it well.

In Vietnam, English is considered a compulsory subject in the curriculum at upper secondary schools and a medium of instruction at universities. One of the four English skills, writing is the challenging one for learners, especially for freshmen. Writing in English requires good knowledge about the grammar, vocabulary, and structure so that many second language learners usually find that writing is a difficult and complex skill to master. According to Silva (1993:668), writing in a second language tends to be “more constrained, more difficult, and less effective” than writing in a first language because when writing, writers need to pay attention to ideas, vocabulary and grammar items.

In the reality of teaching and learning English at TDU - a new private university - where English is learnt as a second language, paragraph writing is conducted for the first-year English majored students because it is one of the fundamental and basic skills. Paragraph writing also is the background for students to learn other writing skills in the next terms. Although most of students have learned English at least 7 years and they have acquired certain amount of English writing a paragraph, their problems in writing are still plentiful and various. One of the problems is weakness in expressing ideas. Furthermore, the obstacles in vocabulary can influence students' writing ability in English. Besides, lacking of knowledge about English grammar is also a disadvantage.

For these above problems, a study about “Some common problems and the ways to improve writing a paragraph of English majored freshmen at Tay Do University” was conducted with two main aims. First, it was to find out the problems in learning writing a paragraph among English majored freshmen at TDU. Second, some appropriate and useful learning ways were suggested with the hope that students can avoid errors in writing paragraph then improve paragraph writing skill. Besides, it was believed that the results of the study could provide teachers with valuable information so they could lead students to the lessons in effective ways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing and the important role of writing

Definition of writing

Writing is an essential skill in our everyday lives and that makes it really an important aspect of foreign language teaching. Sokolik (2003) described writing as a combination of physical and mental acts. It is a physical act of committing ideas to a message and the mental act of generating and organizing ideas into paragraphs. Writing is also viewed as a process as Hyland (2003) explained writing as, “A socio-cognitive activity which involves skills in planning and drafting as well as knowledge of language, contexts and audiences.” Besides, writing involves many different aspects. They are handwriting, spelling, punctuation, sentence construction, organizing a text and paragraphing, and so on. All aspects are carefully considered by the writers.

Moreover, according to Byrne (1988:24), “Writing is a primary means of recording speech, even though it must be acknowledging as a secondary medium of communication.” Writing skills are

specific abilities which help writers put their thoughts into words in a meaningful form and to mentally interact with the message. Besides, writing is also the important expression language activity, Petty and Jensen (1980) defined that, "Writing refers to the mental and physical act of forming letters and words, but it is much more than that; it is putting words into sentences, and paragraphs, spelling words correctly, and observing conventions in written forms and more."

In short, writing is a way to product language that comes from thought. By using writing, people can share their idea, feeling or anything that exist in mind.

The important role of writing

Nowadays, writing plays an important role in both communication and education. In communication, people have many different ways to communicate to each other and writing is one of popular ways to help people express their thoughts or ideas to others. For instance, in daily life, writing message, letters or emails is good ways that help people to keep in touch with their relationship. As Rao (2007) pointed out that, "Writing strengthens learners' learning, thinking and reflecting on the English language in their academics." In addition, Ahmed (2010) noted that competence in writing helps learners perform well in the academic programmes. Writing skill can lead to better college grades and greater academic achievement. In education, writing is necessary skill for students. There are many writing works at school such as many assignments or research papers that students have to finish by writing them down paper. Writing skill also reflect learner's level of education.

For those reasons, good writing skill can help students get better scores and better jobs and even further education. Tribble (1997:8) stated that, "The writing skill is more and more important nowadays. Becoming a proficient writer is one of the major objectives of many students, especially for those who want to become members of international business, administrative or academic communities." Writing skill is directly linked to the way students think and the way they learn. This will help students develop the rest skills including listening, speaking and reading.

In academic, English department students, especially, need to learn writing and prepare for the final academic assignment, thesis writing. This, in terms of student's needs, integrated in writing is necessary. Writing is also one of the important skills in teaching English. It has always occupied place in most English language course.

In fact, with significances of writing, the ability to write affectively plays an important role not only in communication but also in education. Therefore, it is necessary for learners to master and concentrate more on writing.

Paragraph writing

Definition of a paragraph

There are various definitions of a paragraph but in general a paragraph can be understood including topic sentence and supporting sentences to make the main idea clearer. A paragraph is a section of a piece of writing, usually consisting of several sentences dealing with a single subject. The first

sentence of a paragraph starts on a new line. Besides, the fundamental unit of composition is the paragraph and an important key to good essay writing is effective paragraphing. Alice & Ann (1996:2) said that, “A paragraph is basic unit of organization in writing in which a group of some related sentences develop one main idea.”

Additionally, Feist (1996:6) reckoned that, “A paragraph as a group of sentences that develop a single idea. We write in paragraphs to make the organization of our ideas clear to our reader.” In brief, paragraph is an important opportunity to students get a positive message.

Structure of a paragraph

In fact, besides elements of unity and coherence, a paragraph should have three main parts. They are the topic sentence, supporting sentences and the concluding sentence. A topic sentence is usually the first sentence that summarizes the main idea of a paragraph. It states the most important thing that people want to say about their topic. In the other words, a topic sentence must be the controlling idea of the paragraph (Feist, 1996:17). To write a good topic sentence, writer should put it in a complete sentence. Supporting sentences are the sentences include the ideas related to the topic (Feist, 1996:23). They may develop various aspects of the topic such as causes, effects, reasons, example, etc. All the supporting sentences are connected together by cohesive devices. Concluding sentence is usually a single sentence. But some paragraphs may require more than one concluding sentence. The conclusion is usually placed at the end of paragraph. It summarizes or restates the main point you made.

Problems in writing a paragraph in English of Vietnamese students

Vocabulary

Lack of vocabulary

Writing in English learning is important, because it can show students overall proficiency in the language learning. However, students often cannot make good use of their vocabulary ability in writing, because most of them have little practice to write English words.

Vocabulary is one of the most important traits of writing in some studies that confirm writing can give students opportunity to develop their vocabulary knowledge. When students write, their vocabulary proficiency can be improved and consolidated (Muncie, 2002). Muncie’s study (2002) confirmed that it is difficult to write in a foreign language for writers with limited vocabulary.

Besides, according to Krashen (1989), the reasons for devoting attention to vocabulary are “a large vocabulary is of course essential for mastery of a language and “The lack of vocabulary is a major problem.”

Vocabulary knowledge is obviously a prerequisite for writing. Students with lower vocabulary level will have difficulty about writing fluency. If they have limited vocabulary, their paragraph length will not be long. Vocabulary proficiency will be a predictor of a paragraph quality. Thus,

enhancing vocabulary knowledge might be one of the useful ways to write excellent English paragraph.

Word choice

One of the best ways to convey ideas in paragraph is to choose the right words. Unfortunately, many students do not read enough to have a good idea of how to use words either correctly or well. Lauren (2004:22) said that, "One incorrect choice can completely change the meaning of a sentence. Because there are many English words that sound or look almost identical, but have very different meanings, choosing the right one can be difficult."

Students may have difficulty understanding the differences between the various parts of speech (i.e. noun, verb, and adjective); thus, they may use these interchangeably, resulting in confusion for the reader. They also might confuse words that are semantically similar but that are not exactly the same in meaning. Or, they may not understand the difference between countable and non-countable nouns. In short, the categories of word choice error that students often made are wrong connotations and confusing wording.

Word order

There are few endings in English that show person, number, case, and tense, English relies on word order to show relationships between words in a sentence. Besides, word order arranges separate words into sentences in a certain way and indicates where to find the subject, the predicate, and the other parts of the sentence. Word order and context help to identify the meanings of individual words. It is hard to learn word order, Odlin (1989) also stated, "Language learners often make word order errors." Therefore, word order errors are common in language learner output.

Furthermore, "Word order differs significantly across languages." (Selinker 1972). Students make these errors because they attempt to transfer structures to English writing that, while correct in their own native languages, are not correct in English. These errors often occur when students attempt to write directly from their native languages to English.

Thus, the word order plays an important role because it shows the relationships between parts in the sentence.

Grammar

Tenses

In making a sentence in English either written or spoken, tense plays a very important role. Tense is a verb form or a verb phrase used to express a time relationship. There are three verb forms usually used to express time relationships. They are present, past and future forms.

A major part of the problem in grammar for students is in the use of verb tenses. One problem in this area is failure to maintain tense continuity. Godfrey (1980:94) defined maintaining tense continuity as "once a tense is used representing a particular temporal reference central to the topic, the tense will continue until the topic with which it is associated is exhausted. When a new topic

with a new temporal reference calls for a new tense, the former tense is terminated and a new one is initiated.”

Additionally, “Students writing is frequently marked with incorrect tenses that make the writing difficult for the reader to read and understand.” (Chappell and Redby, 1983). Students use verb tenses unconsciously, but may use the incorrect form or change tenses inappropriately during writing. They sometimes do not understand when the verb form will be used in present, past or future form.

In the English language, verb denotes an action and the action has the time relationship with the doer of the action. Hence, the usage of tense plays a decisive role in writing.

Subject-verb agreement

English contains several grammatical rules. One of them is subject-verb agreement that is the most important phenomena in English syntax. Subject-verb agreement means the form of verb depends not only on tense but also on the subject. On the other hand, the subject of a sentence and its corresponding verb must agree in number.

Students do not pay attention to this rule and consequently, they commit error. Even when they keep this rule in their minds, they may still make error just because they are misled by something else but not the real subject. According to Hodges (1998), “Verbs must agree with their subjects and other words between subject and verb.” In other words, students make the errors because they cannot identify the real subject and hence, use wrong verb form.

Consequently, subject-verb agreement is considered a common error. The most frequent type of error is the general category of a verb not agreeing with its subject.

Preposition

Lawal (2004) indicated various relationships between words or phrases in sentences. “The relationship includes those of time, points, position, direction and various degrees of mental or emotional attitudes.” While Agoi (2003) described preposition as “a word or group of words used with a noun or noun equivalents to show the link between that noun which it governs and another word.”

The use of prepositions is the problem for the learners of English. Lawal (2004) stressed, “The correct use of preposition often poses difficulties to the learners”. He added that the way against the problems encountered in their usage is to learn them by rote, different expressions in which prepositions occur separately. Misuse of preposition is one of the observable errors in the students’ use of English. Out of the various uses of prepositions, the use of preposition after adjective or verb is the most commonly misused preposition.

In short, the most problematic word class for students is prepositions. Therefore, students have to learn when and how to use them.

Idea organization

Poor organization

To write a good paragraph, students need to generate and organize ideas. Often students would rather not plan before writing, so they usually have difficulty in organizing their ideas or poor organization during writing. Students' ability to generate and organize ideas can affect the richness of final piece of writing. In order to arrange ideas well, students must be able to get started, concentrate on the task and monitor the quality of the work.

Poor organization stems from poor planning. Organizing is not an easy task. It is important to put all the information together in a logic way. Mkude (1980:62) noted this problem with great concern. He reported that, "They often fail to appreciate the value of organizing linguistic material strategically so as to secure maximal impact. Again, this weakness can be seen within and across sentences." Students have to keep track with the topic and do not go off track. If they do not organize the information well, their paragraph will become a mess and be failed. Therefore, the organization has to be cleared and well planned.

Thus, it can be said that poor organization leads students to the failures in writing a paragraph. Writing a paragraph is a very challenging and discouraging task and students become disappointed as well as lose directions in their learning English, especially in writing.

Lack of coherence

Coherence is the relationship between paragraphs by linking ideas presented in writing together. Coherence is one of the characteristics of a good writing because it makes the ideas flow continuously. Wyrick (2002). Paragraph coherence requires that the thoughts within a paragraph be linked together. In this sense, coherence involves both positioning the ideas or sentences in a paragraph so that they can relate logically to one another, and using certain connecting devices to clarify relationships between the ideas.

Moreover, a lack of coherence challenges the reader and can hurt comprehension, thus rendering your attempt at communication ineffective at best. Students write as many sentences related to the topic as possible without putting them in the logical order. The ideas are arranged disorderly, that results in idea confusing in the paragraph.

In brief, paragraphs where the relationships between sentences are clear are coherent and flow smoothly from sentence to sentence without awkward breaks in rhythm or meaning. Coherence is the trait that provides this clarity by making the paragraph easily understandable.

Lack of unity

The unity of a paragraph is derived from a controlling idea around which the paragraph is organized, a paragraph that lacks unity jumps from idea to idea, topic to topic, with no clear sense of purpose. It is very difficult to understand the writer's intention because the main idea and its

supporting example are placed too far from each other and readers cannot see the connection between the two sentences.

The two most common unity problems are a lack of transitions to tie the clumps of elaboration together and the lack of a developed conclusion. Likewise, errors in paragraph unity were defined as failing to show a controlling idea or having more than one controlling idea, or having a topic sentence that does not really control all the ideas in the paragraph.

Therefore, all sentences in a paragraph should state on the one thing in the topic sentence because unity is an important element of a good paragraph.

Some ways for improving writing a paragraph

Writing is an important skill; students are expected to develop through their school years. Everyone has to learn and improve his or her skills. Even after students have finished school, they should still work to improve their writing skills. Fortunately, there are plenty of easy and accessible ways to improve this skill.

Writing an outline

Writing an outline before beginning a paragraph is the most effective way to organize thoughts and ideas. An outline also called a hierarchical outline, is list arranged to show hierarchical relationships and is a type of tree structure. It is used to present the main points or topics of a given subject, often used as a rough draft or summary of the content of a document.

An outline is useful for any type of writing because it helps to organize thoughts in a logical or sequential order. Nguyen (1998) stated that, "Most of professional writers, experienced critics and talent authors still need an outline before writing. An outline can be written out on the paper or can be thought in the writer's mind." Because learners are in learning and practicing process at school, it is necessary to write a clear outline out on the paper before writing. Actually, the main purpose of writing an outline on the paper before writing is asking writers to think, brainstorm about the topic they want to write. An outline helps learners be more comfortable and easier in writing because it provides all key points and the connection between different points.

Outlines are necessary for better writing because they make writing very easy to add, delete, reorganize, or even completely revamp information as much and as often. As Bean (2001) noted: "Some writers organize better before they write while others organize better after they have attempted to write something." It is helpful to show relationships among the ideas and details.

In addition, an outline is a plan for the paper that will help people organize and structure their ideas in a way that effectively communicates them to their reader and supports their thesis statement. Outlines force students to do two things. First, it imposes structure on writing (and consequently thinking). Second, outlining forces to critically evaluate which ideas and arguments are necessary components and which are not.

Therefore, writing an outline is also a great remedy to students, as it allows them to express ideas briefly without being unduly bogged down in the details or in correct grammar or word choice too early on in the writing process.

Read books

Books are dying today due to the emergence of television, movies, and the Internet. In a time where the world's population is increasingly consumed by technological advances, it is vital that humans read constantly for the sake of obtaining the many benefits attained from reading books.

An improved vocabulary is the most obvious outcome of a strongly established habit of reading. When reading, even when we may not understand every new word, we absorb something from the context that may deepen our understanding of it the next time the word is encountered. Additionally, when students read, they engage actively with the new language and culture. "The more the students read, the more they become familiar with the vocabulary, idiom, sentence patterns, organizational flow, and cultural assumptions of native speakers of the language. Students who read interact with a text that somebody else has written, so they can learn a great deal about writing, in addition to using the language and cultures. They have direct access to the product of a native speaker of the language and they can return to this product repeatedly." (Raimes, 1983:50).

In fact, reading is a very important skill and there are many advantages of reading book. Lack of reading books lead to many sequences such as poor vocabulary and bad usage of structures, this causes students cannot improve their English level. Therefore, focusing and practicing reading practically help people to learn English and gain the satisfied limit of English language skills in easier and faster way.

Practicing writing

Writing is an effective way to communicate and express thoughts, feelings and opinions to people. Writing can be both fun and entertaining and there is a variety of ways to use writing in everyday life. Even if students are not the world's greatest writer, they can practice to become a better writer over time. There are a variety of workbooks and learning materials available at bookstores or online, that can help students with their writing, reading, grammar, and vocabulary skills.

According to Wikipedia, "Practice is the act of rehearsing a behavior over and over, or engaging in an activity again and again, for the purpose of improving or mastering it, as in the phrase "practice makes perfect". Besides, it also mentioned "Some common ways practice is applied to improve reading, writing, interpersonal communication, typing, grammar and spelling."

Furthermore, Dana (2004) said that, writing every day, however, does more than simply instill the discipline to write at will, rather than just when inspiration strikes. It offers several other very important benefits: (1) It boosts your creativity, (2) It increases your confidence, (3) It enables you to experiment with your writing ability, (4) It helps overcome perfectionism, (5) It combats writer's block.

Writing is not different to any other skill in that students need to gain a lot of experience before they reach a certain level of competency. Therefore, practicing writing every day helps the students build creativity and skill, as well as overcome their fear of writing poorly.

RESEARCH AIMS, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

Research aim

The research aimed at investigating common problems and suggesting some ways to write a paragraph of freshmen majoring in English at Tay Do University. The result of the study could help students be able to recognize their problems and overcome those as well as help them with promoting and enhancing English writing skill. Thanks to this study, students would be more confident and enjoyable when practicing writing and improve their writing skill positively.

Research question

Writing skill is so important to people's life. Good writing will be a high prize in professional career. Additionally, practicing writing helps students gain both confidence and experience. However, this skill is not easy. The aim of research would be to record obstacles that freshmen majoring in English have to face and to propose suggestions for them to overcome. Hence, the aim of the study was to answer the following research questions:

1. What are some common problems in writing a paragraph of English majored freshmen at TDU?
2. What are some suitable ways that can help English majored freshmen at TDU overcome the problems?

Hypothesis

To write a good paragraph, students had to face with many problems that were mentioned on Literature review part. It could be considered as the reasons why it was not easy to have a perfect writing. This research was supposed to help English majored freshmen at TDU recognize the original problems and improve their writing skill by using the suggestions from this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

The study was designed to find the answers of the research questions as well as testing the hypothesis presented in the previous part. Questionnaire was used to gather the information. Also students' writing tasks were collected to support the questionnaire results and to gain more insights about the difficulties in writing.

Participants

The participants were 74 English majored freshmen at TDU. Their ages were from 18 to 20. Most of them have been studying English at least 7 years. They studied writing a paragraph about 120 to 150 words with the same material: Interaction 1 Writing by Pavlik & Segal (2007), McGraw-Hill, Silver Edition. Students were studying in the same environment. They still had different difficulties in idea organization, vocabulary as well as grammar.

Instrument

The data was collect via questionnaire and student's writing tasks. The questionnaire was designed basing on literature review, research aims and research questions. It was used to survey the students' opinions to paragraph writing and the problems that they had to face when writing a paragraph. Besides, the ways students do to improve writing skill in English were also mentioned. After that, the writing tasks of the first year English majored students were collected and analyzed.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of 14 questions. They focused on three main factors: student's English background, some common problems and the ways students do to improve writing skill. Students had about 20 minutes to read the questions and gave suitable answers to their opinions.

Table 1: The gist of questionnaire

| Question/Statement | Summary of the question's/statement's content |
|--------------------|---|
| From 1 to 3 | Students' background |
| From 4 to 7 | Problems in writing a paragraph |
| From 8 to 14 | Ways to improve writing skill |

Students' writing tasks

The writing samples were 15 paragraphs written in English by groups of two or three English majored freshmen. These paragraphs were around 120 to 150 words. It was about "The importance of health". The participants had been taught how to write a well-organized paragraph and their teacher gave them many ideas relating to the topic. They had one week to write before their paragraphs were collected by the writing teacher. Then they were asked to be copied for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' background

Based on the questionnaire, some information about students' writing skill was collected. The results of the questionnaire were divided into three parts: students' background, common problems and some ways to improve writing skill.

Students' attitude towards writing skill

Of the four English skills, writing is imperative for success in college and the workforce. The writing skills that freshmen have today directly affect how successful they will be in applications for a college admission, financial aid, and other educational opportunities. Additionally, this skill will influence their future job applications, promotions, career advancements, and even their economy. Let's find how students think about writing skill.

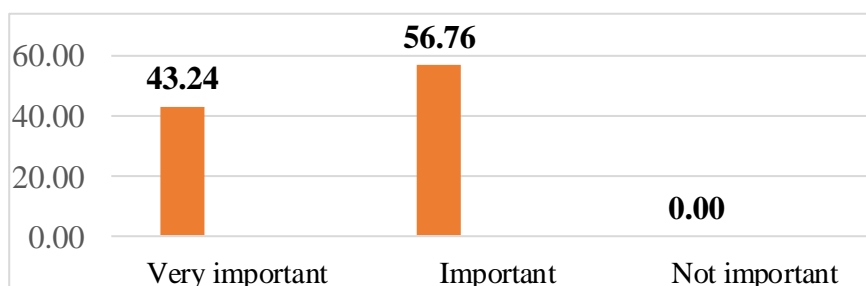


Figure 1: The importance of writing skill

Basing on the data in figure 1, the first-year students had high motivation of learning English, or in other words, they had a positive attitude toward studying writing. 43.24% thought that writing skill was very important and 56.76% believed that writing was an important skill, while no one thought writing was not important at all.

In short, no one can deny the importance of writing, especially in studying environment. It is necessary to improve students' skills in writing a standard paragraph because it is an essential tool in profession or for further education.

Students' ideas about writing skill

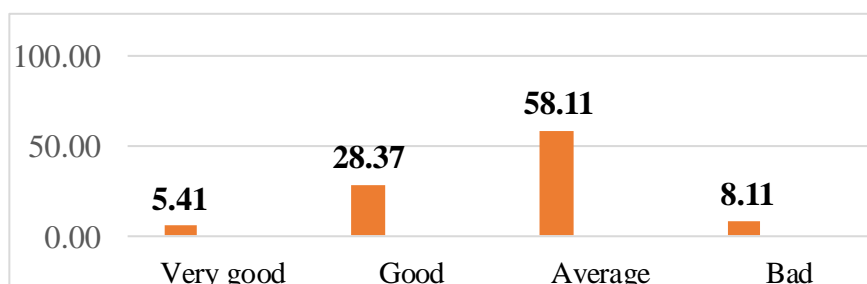


Figure 2: Students' self-evaluation on writing ability

Writing skill is complex and difficult to learn. It is not a naturally acquired skill. Base on the data in figure 2, it could be seen that 8.11% freshmen who thought their writing skill was not good and only 5.41% and 28.37% thought it was very good and good. Clearly, writing seemed a challenge for freshmen who were learning English because this skill required not only widely social knowledge, a good understanding on structures but also a mastery of necessary writing techniques.

For the reason, they made many mistakes when writing that their writing skill was only at the average level counted for 58.11%.

After collected data was analyzed, it could be seen that the freshmen were aware of the importance of learning writing and they had positive attitude toward this skill. However, writing was a difficult skill in English and they still faced many kinds of problems.

5.2. Some common problems in writing a paragraph

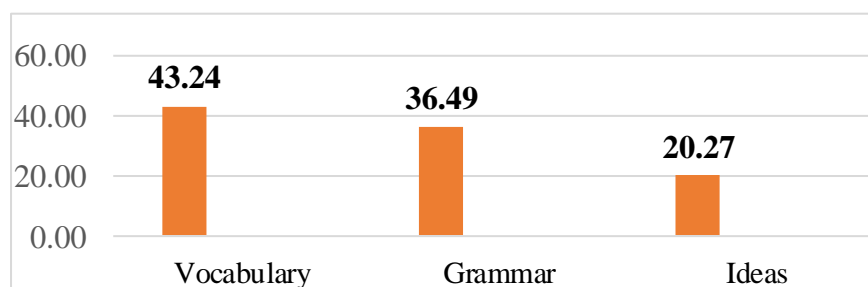


Figure 3: Common problems in writing a paragraph

Writing requires students to use grammar and vocabulary correctly to express what they want to say clearly. Although some of the first-year students had learned paragraph writing, most of them still faced many difficulties. All these difficulties were showed in figure 3. It could be seen that the highest difficulty was vocabulary, accounting for 43.24%. Then, 36.49% felt difficult in grammar and idea difficulty accounted for 20.27%.

The figure illustrated the percentage of the student's common problems with writing paragraph. Many freshmen faced three kinds of problems in writing: vocabulary, grammar and ideas. It was no doubt that the most difficult was vocabulary. It was hard for students to write acceptable and meaningful sentences in English. The next problem is grammar. They did not have enough knowledge about grammar and structure to express ideas. The last was ideas. Some students had difficulty in thinking of the logical idea expression, lacking of the idea and they could not organize their thought. Let's find more details in each problem.

Vocabulary problems

Vocabulary errors are always the most common for second language students in general and for the first-year students at TDU. Base on the reality at TDU, lacking of native teachers, the freshmen did not have chance to practice their vocabulary much. In addition, they did not have many conditions for practicing English regularly to remember vocabulary they met when reading books. Let's find some common vocabulary problems below.

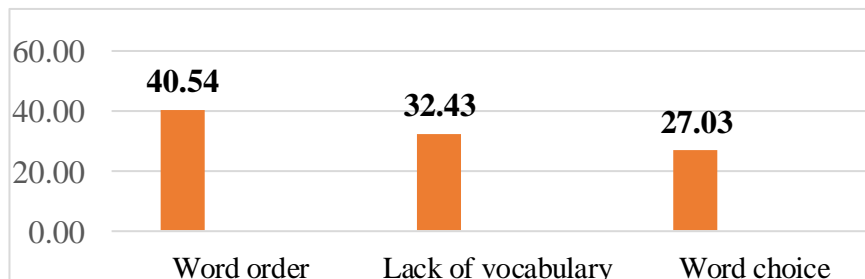


Figure 4: Common vocabulary problems

Word order was the most common problem (40.54%) to the participants. Word order errors referred the incorrect placement of words or group of words in a sentence. The following were some word order errors on students' writing tasks.

(1) *We should have a diet reasonable, eat more fruits and vegetable.*

→ *We should have a reasonable diet, eat more fruits and vegetable.*

(2) *If we are unhealthy, we cannot well study and work.*

→ *If we are unhealthy, we cannot study and work well.*

The next kind of vocabulary error was lack of vocabulary making up (32.43%) of total number errors. Lack of vocabulary decreased students' ability to express thought and ideas as well as students' writing ability. For example:

“Health is very important part of our life. Health affects our work and living. Good health helps us work well and without health, we cannot do what we want. We are unhealthy, we cannot enjoy our lives. And when we have bad health or unhealthy, we have to spend a lot of money on treatment. In short, health is an invaluable property that we have.”

We can see that students make word repetition mistakes because of lacking vocabulary. They did not have enough words to express ideas that made their paragraph incoherent. It should be as follow.

→ *Health is very important part of our life. It affects our works and living. Good health helps us work well and do everything that we want. Otherwise, without health, we cannot enjoy our lives. In addition, with a bad health, we have to spend a lot of money on treatment. In short, health is an invaluable property in our life.*

Also, 27.03% said that they met word choice problem when writing a paragraph. Lack of word choice reflected a lack of creativity, effort and a diverse vocabulary in writing. For instance:

When we sick, we can bring medicine.

→ *When we sick, we can take medicine*

In brief, vocabulary was a big problem for freshmen in writing a paragraph. They faced many problems in lacking of vocabulary, word order and word choice.

Grammatical problems

It is undeniable fact that an understanding of a language grammar is essential. Based on the information from the questionnaire, it was found that there were three kinds of grammatical errors that freshmen usually made when making English sentences as tenses, subject-verb agreement and preposition. Figure 5 would describe the results:

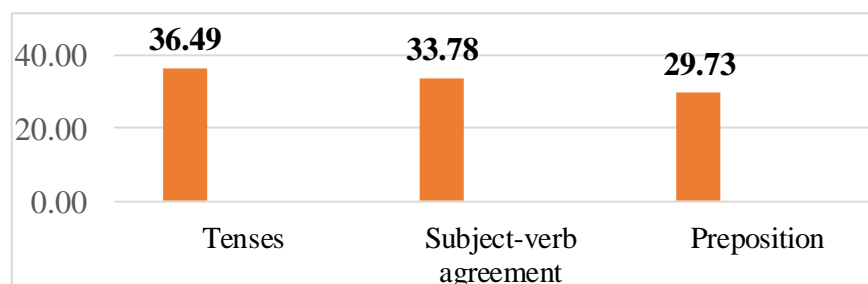


Figure 5: Common grammatical problems

Among the kinds of error related to grammar, tenses were the most frequent errors that students commonly made in their paragraph (36.49%). Because of limited background knowledge about grammar, most of students were not aware of using tenses in different cases. Examples of these errors were as follow:

(1) *If you have a good health, the life will ~~✓~~ wonderful.*

→ *If you have a good health, the life will be wonderful.*

(2) *If we are unhealthy, we will losing our life because we cannot do anything that we want.*

→ *If we are unhealthy, we will lose our life because we cannot do anything that we want.*

Subject-verb agreement errors were the second highest percentage, making up 33.78% of total number of grammatical errors. English grammar required the subject and the verb to agree in number and students forgot they must be singular or plural. Examples of errors in subject-verb agreement:

(1) *Everyone have dream about the good health.*

→ *Everyone has dream about the good health.*

(2) *Health affect our works and life.*

→ *Health affects our works and life.*

Students also met difficulty in using correct forms of preposition, and preposition errors were the final errors that students frequently committed when writing a paragraph with 29.73%. The following was example of wrong choice of preposition:

When we have a good health, we do not have to spend a lot of money for treatment.

→ *When we have a good health, we do not have to spend a lot of money on treatment.*

Basing on the result of data analysis, many first-year students had much trouble in English grammar. They lacked a basic understanding of subject-verb agreement, and they still did not know how to use correct tenses and prepositions in English.

Idea problems

It seemed that freshmen did not master the idea organization of the paragraph. The elements restraining the smooth flow of the paragraph were errors in idea organization. These included illogical arrangements of idea or poor organizations, failures in the paragraph coherence and paragraph unity. Figure 6 showed further details about idea problems.

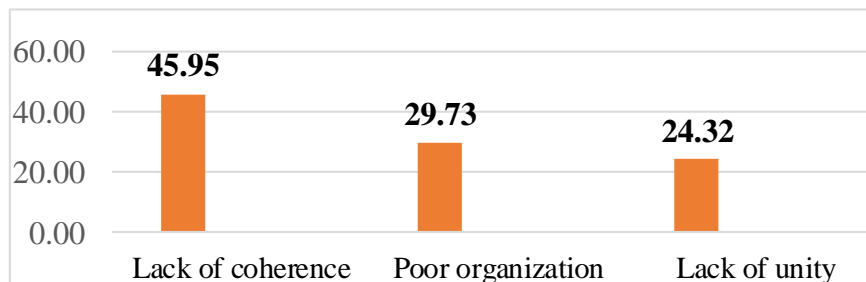


Figure 6: Common idea problems

As we could see from the above figure, the most idea problems belonged to lack of coherence. It accounted for 45.59%. Students faced many problems in connecting the idea smoothly. An example of incoherent paragraph:

“Health is very important of our life. If we do not have a good health, we cannot study or work well. ✓ If we are unhealthy, we cannot enjoy our life. ✓ When we have bad health, we have to spend a lot of money on treatment. ✓ Health is important, so we should take care of ourselves.”

In this example, students did not know the word coherence and their paragraph often lacked necessary transitional markers. Therefore, the sentences are unconnected and not clear enough to understand. It should be as follow.

→ *Health is very important of our life. If we do not have a good health, we cannot study or work well. Besides, if we are unhealthy, we cannot enjoy our life. Moreover, when we have bad health, we have to spend a lot of money on treatment. To sum up, health is important, so we should take care of ourselves.*

Besides coherence errors, poor organization errors also students' problems, accounted for 29.73%. Students who made this kind of errors did not have enough experience in arranging the ideas logically. An example of unorganized paragraph:

“Health is very important for everyone. When you are healthy, you will be happy and you can do better when you do something. If you have without good health, you will not study well, work inefficient. When you have a good health, you will have a long life and better learning. If you are unhealthy, you cannot enjoy your life and do what you want. In short, health is very important, you need to protect your health.”

Students did not have enough experience in arranging the ideas chronological and logically. Obviously, the sentences in this example were not logically ordered, that resulted in idea confusing in the paragraph. It should be as follow.

→ *Health is very important for everyone. If you are healthy, you will be happy and you can do better when you do something. In addition, when you have a good health, you will have a long life and better learning. However, without good health, you will not study well, work inefficient. Also, if you are unhealthy, you cannot enjoy your life and do what you want. In short, health is very important, you need to protect your health.*

One more kind of mistakes was lack of unity. It seemed to be fewer than the others with only 24.32%. Many students did not have enough ideas to support the main idea that made their paragraph was too short and boring. An example of a paragraph lacking unity:

“Health is very important of our life..... When we sick, we will spend a lot of money on treatment. Instead of that, we can use tradition remedies. For example, when I get a flu, my sister will cook rice soup with ginger for me, I eat it in the morning and in the afternoon”

The example showed that the sentence *“For example, when I get a flu, ... I eat it in the morning and in the afternoon.”* in paragraph were not related the topic sentence. The ideas arranged disorderly and scattered around loosely, thus damaging the unity of the paragraph.

Through the above result, it could be seen that expressing ideas made students difficult in writing because students did not know how to organize a paragraph and their writings were incoherence and lack of unity.

To sum up, the freshmen affirmed that they had studied English language for a long time, but their performances in the writing were still poor. They had far more difficulties in idea organization, vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, it was necessary for them to find a suitable learning ways to improve their writing skill.

Some ways to improve writing skill

There are many ways for students to improve their writing skill. Three common ways were presented for freshmen. They were writing an outline, read books relating to the topic, and practicing writing every day. Figure 6 presented students' ideas about different ways of improving writing skill.

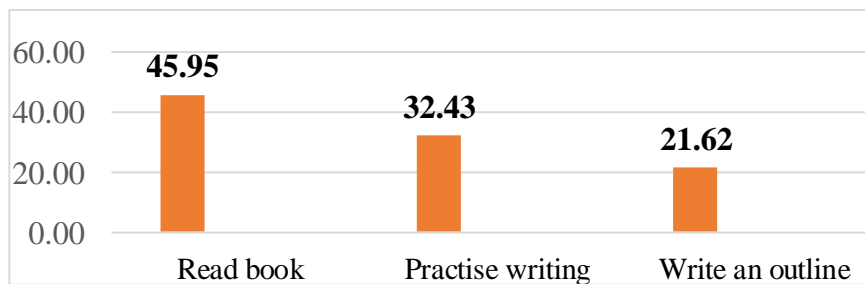


Figure 7: Common ways for improving writing skill

Remarkably, a large number of students (45.95%) mentioned that read book relating to the topic was the best choice. After that, practicing writing was also highly appreciated by students to be good ways to help them learning writing successfully. It accounted for 32.43%. Nevertheless, writing an outline did not seem to be an effective way; only 21.62% students agreed with this way.

In fact, there were many solutions which help freshmen improve writing a paragraph. Thoughts, ideas, and actions needed to flow logically and be grouped together. Outlines were ideal for planning and organizing a complex piece of writing. Besides, most of students were quite busy these days, which made finding time for activities like reading seem quite impossible. However, without reading often, they would never truly understand about the effective and correct writing. Reading helped students to expand vocabulary and familiarize with different writing styles. Furthermore, the freshmen would never truly improve writing skills without making an effort at it. They needed to practice writing and get a habit from the start. Gradually, it would become more of a habit and easier to write. Let's find more details about each way.

Students' ideas about reading books relating to the topic

Vocabulary is a vital aspect in writing a paragraph; without sufficient vocabulary students cannot understand others or express their own ideas. Many freshmen at TDU realized that their vocabulary was limited so that they had difficulties in writing. Therefore, reading books was one of useful ways in terms of boosting vocabulary and improving writing skills. Let's find students' attitude towards reading books.

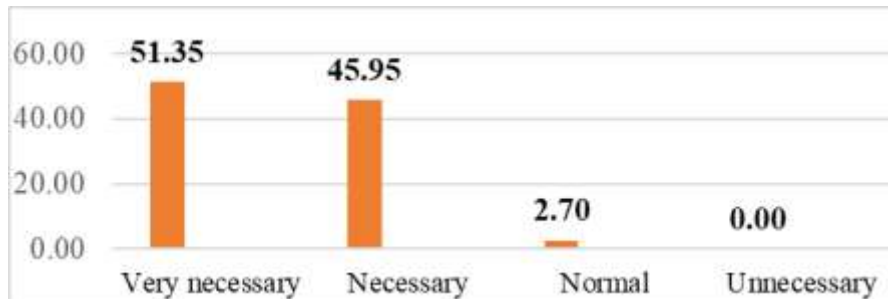


Figure 8: Students' attitude towards reading books

Figure 8 showed that 51.35% agreed that read book relating to the topic is very necessary. The proportion of students who were aware of necessary of reading book accounted for 45.95% and only 2.7% thought it was normal, and no one chose unnecessary. Let's have a look at the benefits of read books relating to the topic.

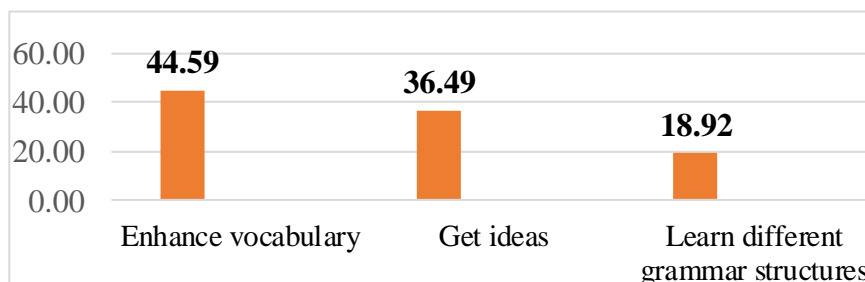


Figure 9: The benefits of reading books

In general, freshmen highly appreciated reading books relating to the topic that made them enhance vocabulary; it accounted for 44.95% and 36.49% said that reading book helped them getting ideas and knowledge for writing a paragraph. Additionally, 18.92% thought that they could learn different structure to make sentences when reading books.

Clearly, reading books is important and no one can deny all of the benefits that are offered by reading books. When reading, freshmen will expand their awareness and knowledge, each book or article will make them wiser and more intelligent. Reading will also help them to enrich vocabulary and learn many different sentences so that they can improve their own writing abilities.

Students' ideas about practicing writing

Many freshmen are afraid of grammar and think it is difficult. The best way to improve writing skill, especial grammar, is to practice. They work through different grammar rules, so they get experience in several forms. Consequently, it was not surprised that in figure 7, there were 32.43% of students who agreed that practicing writing everyday helped to improve writing ability. Let's find students' attitude towards practicing writing.

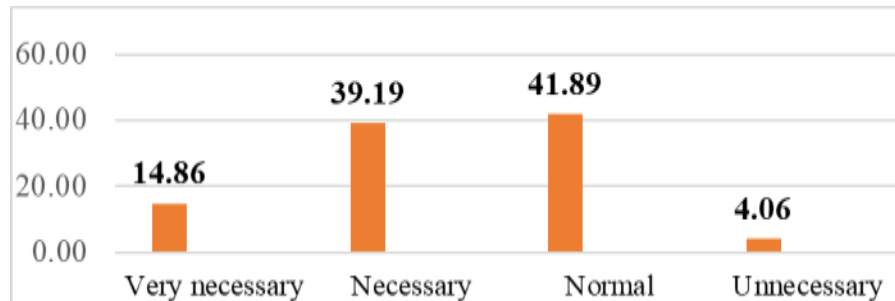


Figure 10: Students' attitude towards practicing writing

Figure 10 showed that 54.05% agreed that read practicing writing was very necessary and necessary. The proportion of students who were unaware of necessary of practicing accounted only 4.06%, and 41.89% thought it was normal.

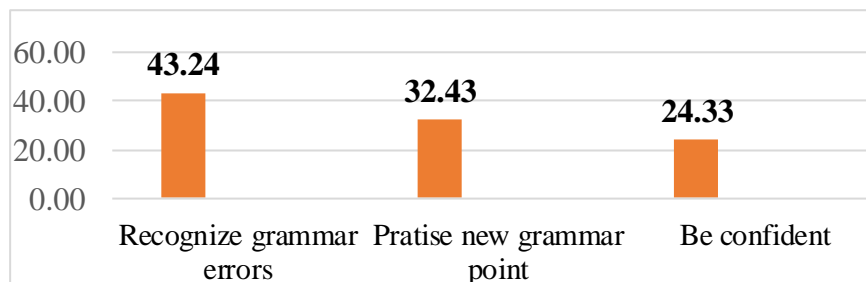


Figure 11: The benefits of practicing writing

Practicing writing everyday had many benefits. Most of first-year students (43.24%) said that they could find out their grammar errors when practicing writing. A part of them (32.43%) thought that writing everyday helped them learn new grammar points. Besides, some students (24.33%) answered that practicing writing made them feel more confident when using English grammar in writing a paragraph.

Thus, practicing writing can have positive influences on students' writing ability. The freshmen will recognize grammar errors and correct them when writing everyday. Hence, practicing writing is a great way to help them avoid grammar errors that has met throughout writing process. It also gives freshmen much new grammar knowledge that helps them improve writing skill. On the other hand, practicing writing can aid freshmen to feel confident because the more they write, the more valuable information they learn, so that they will not be afraid of making mistakes.

Students' ideas about writing an outline

Idea organization makes the difference between a good paragraph and a poor one. A student may have some great ideas, but if those ideas are unorganized and poorly worded, it becomes difficult to

read and despite the great ideas, it is not a good paragraph. There are useful kinds of way to assist students in organizing ideas in writing skills. One of them is writing an outline.

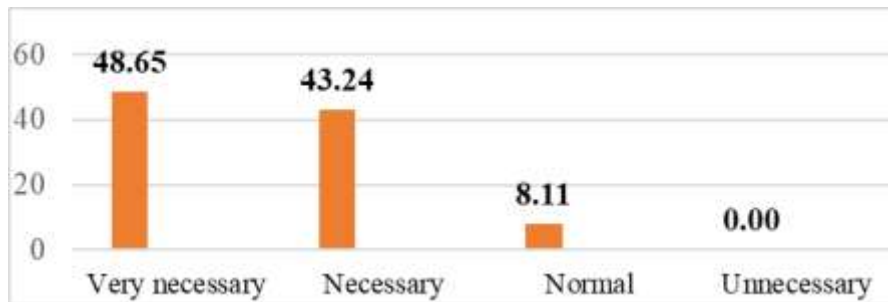


Figure 12: Students' attitude towards writing an outline

In fact, writing an outline plays a particular role in writing (counted for 21.64%, in figure 7). This could explain reason why 91.89% of the students agreed that writing an outline was important when being asked about the role of write an outline in writing. In details, 48.65% concurred that writing an outline was very necessary, 43.24% selected important answer and 8.11% thought that it was normal. Let's find the benefits of writing an outline.

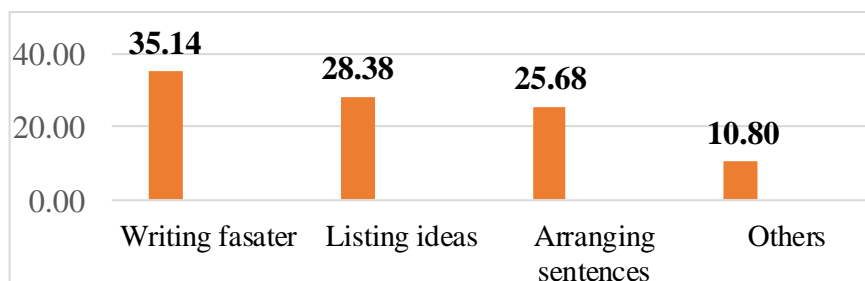


Figure 13: The benefits of writing an outline

Clearly, writing an outline brought many benefits for students. A large of number of students (28.38%) said that an outline helped them list ideas that supported the main idea, while there were 25.68% thought that they could arrange sentences when writing an outline. In addition, 35.14% agreed that writing faster was one of the benefits of writing an outline. Other students (10.08%) felt tedious when writing an outline, they thought that it was unnecessary for organizing writing and they did not have enough time to do it.

To sum up, writing an outline is beneficial during writing a paragraph because they help the freshmen organize their thoughts. Outlines enable freshmen list ideas and examples to support the main idea as well as visualize whether they have included enough information for a paragraph. Furthermore, when writing an outline, writers can move information around and arrange logical sentences. Besides, outlining actually helps to write more quickly and effectively.

In conclusion, there are different ways of improving writing a paragraph for freshmen at TDU. Through the above results, it can be seen that reading books relating to the topic and practicing

writing are the most effective strategies to deal with the common problems. Besides, writing an outline is a useful way that helps freshmen to improve writing skill. Thus, the study partly dealt with students' difficulties in paragraph writing. They should choose the most suitable ways to help them recognize and correct errors effectively as well as improve their writing skill.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This study aims to identify some discourse features of English paragraphs written by first-year students majoring in English at TDU as well as find out the problems they often make when writing English paragraphs then put forward some solutions.

Basing on the results of the questionnaire, most of freshmen had highly positive attitude to writing during the course because they believed that writing English was a key to find a good job. However, they considered writing as the most difficult because it required correct grammar structure, knowledge about vocabulary as well as well organized ideas.

The analysis revealed that during the long time of learning writing English, most of English majored freshmen at TDU still faced with many problems in expressing ideas, vocabulary and grammar. Firstly, the greatest number of errors belonged to vocabulary (43.24%). Word order (40.54%) was difficult for students in writing a paragraph. Lack of vocabulary and errors in word choice occurred less often (32.43% and 27.03% respectively), but they also showed that students' weakness in the use of English language. Secondly, many errors in students' writing were due to grammatical errors (36.49%). The students' writing may have been related to the language structures such as tenses (36.49%) subject-verb agreement (33.78%), and preposition (29.73%). Because of limited knowledge about grammar, it was hard for freshmen to write correct and meaningful sentences in English so that they could not get good marks for writing tests. Thirdly, regarding the problems of ideas organization (20.27%), the study showed that students did not use transitional words to link the ideas together and the sentences in the paragraphs did not directly relate to the main idea so that the paragraph was incoherent (45.95%) and lack of unity (24.32%). In addition, it seemed that most freshmen did not have organizational skills (29.73%) and paid little attention to topic sentences, introductions and conclusions. Error analysis played an important role because it could help in students' error recognition and thus aid students in writing good paragraphs after they learned how to correct these errors through practices.

Moreover, it was necessary to raise students' awareness of problems they often faced in writing a paragraph and had them correct their own errors. In order to deal with the problem, some solutions were suggested for students learning writing in English. The freshmen should write their outlines carefully and list ideas relevant to the topic. Writing an outline (21.62%) helped them arrange sentences so that they could write faster. Besides, the students need to read more books relating to the topic (45.95%). It would be very useful to get ideas, expand vocabulary as well as learn different structures to make a paragraph for their writing tasks. It was obvious that the most important thing to do was practicing writing (32.43%); it would help students enhance writing skill and they could avoid some common problems in writing. Consequently, students could feel confident of their writing skill.

To conclude, the results of the study showed that the problems that students committed were idea organization, vocabulary and grammar. From this, it was hoped that the results of this thesis could be of some helps not only for students to be aware of the importance of writing in English so that they could improve their writing skills but also for teachers of English to develop effective measures for teaching English writing skill. Hence, students can minimize the occurrence of errors when writing.

Recommendation

It was hoped that this study would be the foundation for further study. First, further study would also give more the solutions to help students improve their writing skill. Second, the future research should be having an interview in order to gain more information about the causes of errors the students make in their writing paragraphs. In addition, further study may focus on other errors of juniors majoring in English or others.

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