

# Investigating Students' Awareness to Apply the Use of Paragraph Writing Skills in Different Classes: A Study of Comparisons

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed at investigating whether or not undergraduate students apply the knowledge they have learnt from an English class to other non-English subject classes. To conduct this study, one particular skill of English – paragraph writing – which students had learnt from a core English course was used as key knowledge to find out their awareness to apply them in different ways. The paragraph writing skills were chosen because they concern not only the use of language, but also the organisation of ideas, an essential element of almost all kinds of writing that helps learners to manage their ideas logically and present them in an organised way. Therefore, these skills can be applicable to other areas of study. The researchers employed two qualitative methods: content analysis and interviews. The method of content analysis was used to analyse two writing assignments from two different subjects, given to 30 first year students from the School of Architecture and Design, KMUTT who enrolled in both courses and were randomly selected for this study. However, this study particularly focuses on organisation of a paragraph writing, not grammatical features. The interviews were used to obtain more in-depth data regarding their awareness on applying the knowledge in each assignment. Preliminary findings of this on-going study show that more than half of the students have applied paragraph writing skills in their written assignments. More detailed findings and implications of the study are further discussed in the conference.

Keywords: Paragraph Writing, English Writing Class, Writing Organisation, Academic English Writing, Organisation of Ideas

## INTRODUCTION

Writing skills have been taught and practiced in educational institutes of all levels as of the necessity of communicating through texts in all languages including English, today's most common lingua franca. Students of English language learn how to write, not only in terms of how to use the language, but also how to organize their ideas for organised pieces of writing, basically starting from the fundamental paragraph writing. Due to Oshima and Hogue (2006), a good paragraph writing must contain related sentences discussing one main idea: a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence, with coherence through the use of transition words. Once taught and practiced in English classes, students are normally expected to apply this knowledge to all of their academic writings. Therefore, the research question is whether or not students have used the paragraph writing principles in writing assignments of other classes besides English classes as a study of comparisons, especially when the instructors of those classes did not advise them to apply the paragraph writing skills.

## METHODOLOGY

### Subjects

The subjects of this study were 30 first year undergraduate students of the School of Architecture and Design, KMUTT who enrolled two different subjects: LNG 221: Academic English for International Students and GEN 231: Miracle of Thinking. Their English proficiency levels range from intermediate to upper intermediate (according to their standardized test scores submitted to the School).

### Instruments and Procedure

The main instruments used for collecting data in this survey were students' two writing assignments in LNG 221 and GEN 231, and interviews. Students wrote a paragraph in each assignment; they discussed an opinion in the first and a reflection in the latter.

Researchers thus used the content analysis to analyse the components of paragraph writing based on those of Oshima and Hogue (2006). That is, a good paragraph must comprise a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence or final thought, with cohesion through the use of transition words.

Also researchers prepared a set of questions for interviewing each student after finishing the assignments to gain more insights.

### Data analysis

The analysis of the data focused on the components of each writing assignment from each class whether students were aware to use the principle of paragraph writing while writing them.

The data obtained were classified into a comparative table to show each component: the topic sentence, the supporting sentences and the concluding sentence or final thought. Also the use of transition signals were divided into 9 categories. The data from the interviews were used to support the results of the quantitative data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: The results of the use of key components of paragraph writing in students' written assignments

Key Components of a Paragraph	LNG 221	GEN 231
	Number of students	Number of students
Topic sentence, Supporting sentences, and Conclusion	23	14
Topic sentence, Supporting sentences but NO Conclusion	4	7
Supporting sentences, Conclusion but NO Topic sentence	2	3
Supporting sentences, but NO Topic sentence and NO Conclusion	1	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>

Table 2: The transition signals that were mostly used in the two writing assignments of each course

Transition Signals	LNG 221	GEN 231
1. To list ideas	First, Second, etc.	At first
2. To add a similar idea	and	and
3. To add an opposite idea	but	but
4. To give an example	for example	for example
5. To express an opinion	in my opinion	in my opinion
6. To give a reason	because	because
7. To give a result	so	so
8. To add a conclusion	in conclusion	in conclusion
9. To give another possibility	or	or

From analyzing the students' writing assignments it was found that the majority of the students (23) included the three key components of a paragraph—topic sentence, supporting sentences, and conclusion—in their LNG 221 written assignments.

For GEN 231 which was not an English writing class, less than half (14) of the students included those key components in their writing.

When looking particularly at the two key components: topic sentence and conclusion, it was found that topic sentence was the component that most of the students included in their writing for both subjects as can be seen in Table 1. This implies that the students were more aware of the importance of topic sentence. From interviewing them, the researchers learnt that they realized that the topic sentence presented the main idea of their writing.

Another essential component of a paragraph is coherence which is demonstrated through the use of transition signals. From the study, a variety of transition signals were seen when analyzing the two pieces of writing of each student. However, the transition signals that were repeatedly used in both assignments were simple connectors, such as and, but, because, etc. as seen in Table 2.

From the interviews with the students, they had already known about using transitional words and phrases to relate ideas before studying LNG 221. Therefore, they commonly used those words and expressions in their written assignments of various subjects. Nevertheless, they learnt and could use more varieties of transition signals after studying this paragraph writing course.

From this study, it can be concluded that the students learnt to use paragraph writing principles in their writing. However, when it was not an English writing course, they were not fully aware of using all the key components of a paragraph in their writing. The component that was mostly ignored by the students was the conclusion, and the component that they considered more important was the topic sentence.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

1. To answer the research question, most students in this group have used the paragraph writing principles, either completely or partially, in writing assignments of both English and other classes even though the instructors of those classes did not advise them to apply the paragraph writing skills.
2. Nevertheless, students seemed to ignore to use complete paragraph writing principles in their writing in non-English subject courses such as the introduction and conclusion. The findings comply with the studies of Hinnon (2004), Sattayatham and Ratanapinyowong (2008) and Khansir et al. (2013) that when it comes to paragraph writing, many students seem to disregard key components; that is, introduction, conclusion and transitional words. These elements are important as they help presenting ideas of writers clearly and at the same time creating unity and coherence (Oshima & Hogue, 2006). As a result, it is necessary for students to include a proper topic sentence, support it with related details and end the paragraph with a concluding sentence or final thought.
3. From the study, it is clearly seen that most students realize the key elements of paragraph writing principles, but they seem to ignore them when they write outside the English classes. English instructors therefore should advise and emphasize the importance of these principles in their classes. Also it is important that students should be given proper class activities or assignments with suitable learning strategies to help them improve their writing and, more importantly, use them in other classes as well.

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